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The first 3500 years of aspirin history from its roots – A concise summary

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Abstract

Aspirin is currently the most widely used drug worldwide, and has been clearly one of the most important pharmacological achievements of the twentieth century. Historians of medicine have traced its birth in 1897, but the fascinating history of aspirin actually dates back >3500 years, when willow bark was used as a painkiller and antipyretic by Sumerians and Egyptians, and then by great physicians from ancient Greece and Rome. The modern history of aspirin precursors, salicylates, began in 1763 with Reverend Stone - who first described their antipyretic effects - and continued in the 19th century with many researchers involved in their extraction and chemical synthesis. Bayer chemist Felix Hoffmann synthesized aspirin in 1897, and 70 years later the pharmacologist John Vane elucidated its mechanism of action in inhibiting prostaglandin production. Originally used as an antipyretic and anti-inflammatory drug, aspirin then became, for its antiplatelet properties, a milestone in preventing cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases. The aspirin story continues today with the growing evidence of its chemopreventive effect against colorectal and other types of cancer, now awaiting the results of ongoing primary prevention trials in this setting. This concise review revisits the history of aspirin with a focus on its most remote origins.

Keywords: Acetylsalicylic acid; Antiplatelet agents; Aspirin; Cardiovascular disease; History of medicine.

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